Earth-Friendly Gardening & Landscaping

The GreenMan

Creating a Butterfly Garden

Butterflies are on the wing! They grace our days with a rare and evanescent beauty. And yet, for all their amusing fluttering and richness of color, they have unfortunately met with much the same treatment as many of the other beneficial organisms in our environment. Their habitat has declined significantly due to the persistent impact of overdevelopment and urban sprawl. Moreover, their very existence is continually threatened by chemical-intensive efforts to eliminate agricultural, lawn, and garden pests.

Why develop a butterfly garden? Beyond the beauty and life that these near-magical creatures bring to our gardens and homes, a butterfly garden provides a biological ark: a unique habitat which aids in the preservation of these often endangered insects. And the butterfly garden becomes a unique habitat for gardeners as well, teaching all of us to live without pesticides, to accept some losses to hungry caterpillars, and to fit in with a natural, evolving system.

Planning and Planting. Anyone, anywhere can become a butterfly gardener. The size of your garden is not important (some gardeners even use window boxes), and you needn't tear up an established garden — many successful butterfly gardeners began by incorporating favorite nectar and food sources into existing beds. However, there are a number of important details to consider before beginning.

Location. Ideally, your butterfly garden should be in a sunny area with at least five to six hours full sun; both the insects and their favorite plants are sun lovers. Also, to help butterflies fly through the garden, land, and take-off, it is recommended that the area be somewhat sheltered from the wind by a wall, hedge, or trees.

Moisture. Although they can "drink" from moist, wet soils, butterflies cannot obtain moisture from open water. Mud puddles or damp sand should be placed in the garden. Try digging a small pit or trench, lining it with plastic, and then filling it with wet sand.

Sunning Areas. Butterflies need areas to perch and spread their wings, allowing sunlight to warm them and raise their body temperature. Chilled butterflies are sluggish and otherwise inactive. Sunning areas can be created by placing flat rocks throughout your garden, keeping old fenceposts clear, or replacing an area of vegetation with wood chips or other mulch.

Selecting Plants for the Garden. Butterflies are very specific in their plant interests. Some plants are favored for depositing eggs -- these then become the "host" plants or food sources for developing larvae or caterpillars. Other plants are prized for their nectar. Sometimes these plants play both roles,

though generally host plants only appeal to female butterflies. Also, some butterflies will frequent a wide variety of nectar-rich flowers and host plants, while others will patronize only one single species.

When selecting plants for your butterfly garden consider the following: (1) Which butterflies are already in your area? Which would you like to attract? What are their favorite host and nectar plants? Any decent butterfly reference book can help you to identify butterflies and suitable plants. (2) The plant's adaptability to your climate. Most full service garden centers can help you make selections from the following list. (3) General growth habit and appearance. Will the plants you select fit into your current planting design? You may already have many of the plants you need on hand. Some rearranging and interplanting could quickly help you establish a wonderful butterfly oasis with little additional cost and labor.

Remember to include several varieties of both host and nectar plants in your garden to attract the greatest number and variety of butterflies. Host plants attract female butterflies, provide egg-laying sites, provide food for larvae, and ensure a continued butterfly population in your area. Nectar-producing plants attract both males and females, and provide food for them. When selecting nectar sources, pay special attention to large, single, and upright blooms; they provide better "landing pads" and facilitate nectar extraction. Also, plan for a diversity of colors since butterflies are especially attracted to bright, vibrant colors and striking contrast: bold and brash is often the recipe for success. Lastly, establish year-round color with succession plantings to provide bloom throughout the year: it is both an advantage for yourself as a viewer -- and as a lure for a wider range of butterflies, which have distinct life spans and peak periods of activity.

Dietary Supplements. Many experienced butterfly gardeners increase "visitation" through supplemental feeding sources. These include manures and rotting fruit, which attract a wide variety of butterfly, as well as "home-brews," which are normally low, flat dishes filled with sugar-water, or sugar-enriched beer or wine. Perhaps you can include butterflies in your taste-testing of microbrewery beers!

Plants for Attracting Butterflies. The following lists commonly available plants by their botanical name, with common name in parentheses. Note that many species (indicated by spp.) within a given genus are excellent nectar or food sources. and plants in boldface serve both functions. Most nectar sources are also excellent hummingbird attractants.

Host/Food Plants

Alcea spp. **(Hollyhock)**
Anethum graveolens (Dill)
Antirrhinum spp. (Snapdragon)
Arabis spp. (Rock Cress)
Asclepias spp. **(Milkweed/Butterflyweed)**
Barbarea spp. **(Yellowrocket)**
Brassica spp. (Broccoli/Cabbage)
Cassia spp. (Senna)
Celtis spp. (Hackberry)
Chelone glabra (Turtlehead)
Daucus carota (Queen-Anne's-Lace)
Foeniculum vulgare (Fennel)
Humulus spp. (Hops)
Lathyrus odoratus (Sweetpea)
Lindera benzoin (Spicebush)
Liriodendron tulipifera (Tulip Poplar)
Lupinus spp. (Lupine)
Malus spp. (Apple)
Passiflora spp. (Passionflower)
Petroselinum crispum (Parsley)
Phaseolus spp. (Bean)
Prunus spp. (Cherry/Plum)
Ruta graveolens (Rue)
Salix spp. (Willow)
Viola spp. **(Violet)**

Nectar Sources

Achillea millefolium (Common Yarrow)
Allium spp.
Anaphalis spp. (Everlasting)
Apocynum spp. (Dogbane)
Artemisia spp. (Wormwood)
Aster spp.
Campsis radicans (Trumpet Creeper)
Chrysanthemum spp.
Cleome spp. (Spider Plant)
Clethra alnifolia (Sweet Pepperbush)
Coreopsis spp. (Tickseed)
Cosmos spp.
Delphinium elatum
Dianthus barbatus (Sweet William)
Digitalis purpurea (Foxglove)
Echinacea spp. (Purple Coneflower)
Eupatorium spp. (Joe-Pye Weed)
Fragaria virginiana (Virginia Strawberry)
Heliotropium spp. (Heliotrope)
Hemerocallis spp. (Daylily)
Hibiscus syriacus (Rose of Sharon)
Iberis sempervirens (Edging Candytuft)
Ipomoea spp. (Morning-glory)
Lantana spp. (Shrub Verbena)
Lavandula spp. (Lavender)
*Lobelia spp. (*Cardinal Flower)
*Lobularia (*Sweet alyssum)
Lonicera sempervirens (Coral Honeysuckle)
Lunaria annua (Money Plant)
Malva spp. (Mallow)
Mentha spp. (Mint)
Myosotis scorpioides (Forget-me-not)
Nepeta (Catmint)
Nicotiana alata (Flowering Tobacco)
Phlox spp.
Primula vulgaris (English Primrose)
Rhododendron spp.
Rosmarinus officinalis (Rosemary)
Rubus spp. (Bramble fruits)
Rudbeckia spp (Black-eyed Susan)
Ruellia spp.
Salvia spp. (Sage)
Sedum spp. (Stonecrop)
Solidago spp. (Goldenrod)
Syringa (Lilac)
Tagetes spp. (Marigold)
Taraxacum spp. (Dandelion)
Thymus spp. (Thyme)
Trifolium pratense (Red Clover)
Tropaeolum majus (Garden Nasturtium)
Zinnia spp.

The GreenMan Show is produced for County Cable Montgomery by the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and the Office of Public Information. It airs daily on Cable Channel 6 and can also be viewed on the Internet. For a complete schedule and online access, visit **www.greenmanshow.com.**

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